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ABSTRACT

The month-long teacher strike in 1987 was the impetus for a wave of reform efforts directed toward the Chicago, Illinois, school system. State legislation of far-reaching reforms, the governor's vetoes, and a subsequent reconvening of the legislature resulted in a restructuring and decentralization of the school system. Many of the reforms are among the most controversial of those discussed by educators throughout the United States. Parental involvement in schools gives parents the final say in choosing and keeping principals. Principals have greater authority over hiring teachers and managing school affairs, and their accountability is ensured by renewable 4-year contracts. School improvement plans are required to emphasize goal setting and achievement rather than educational process. Educational choice will allow parents to choose the school best suited to the educational needs of their children. All public educators have a stake in what happens in Chicago schools. Local school boards must begin the process of change. Two brief comments are appended: "Does Change Equal Reform?" (Joy Rogers); and "A Mixed Bag of Reforms" (John A. Stewart). (MLF)

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Updating SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES

Volume 20/Number 1/January 1989

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Reforming the public schools—Chicago style!

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The struggle to enact legislation to reform the turbulent Chicago Public School System has pitted champions of the status quo against those proposing drastic remedies as the only way to improve educational quality for the city's 400,000 school children. Both sides have won battles in this war. The outcome has yet to be decided. Nevertheless, this struggle will affect profoundly the future of public education throughout the United States regardless of its outcome. The principles at stake in the Chicago reform—if implemented fully—would revolutionize many common educational practices. For example:

- **Performance-based contracts will replace principal tenure.**
- **Parents will have the majority vote on local school policymaking councils.**
- **Open enrollment (Parental choice among schools).**

Old battle, new turf

The struggle is not new; it has been waged for years. However, the battleground has broadened in recent years as businesses complain that Chicago public school graduates are unemployable. A high school diploma no longer guarantees the reading, writing, and simple arithmetic skills of the young adult. More often and with louder voices, the business community is criticizing the school system in charge.

An increasing amount of time and resources must be earmarked for employee training in basic educational skills. The habits of discipline, following directions, acceptable social conduct, and diligence—traits traditionally considered a byproduct of the public school's mission to serve children of diverse social and economic levels—at best are difficult to instill after high school.

In many walks of life, there is concern that schools are failing their charges on too many counts. An estimated 13 percent of 17-year-olds and as many as 40 percent of minority youth are considered functionally illiterate. Many of the literate ones have large gaps in their knowledge of science and history. Nationwide, the recurring defeat of school levies reflects voter frustration as the demands for educational funding grow.

The continuing cycle of poverty in generation after generation of American families is mirrored in the turmoil and inadequacies of Chicago's 595 schools. The hope has dimmed that education would provide these children with the opportunity to build a better life. Yet, the demographic realities of an aging population demand full use of the available workforce. Without quality education, tomorrow's citizens will not have their passport to full participation in the political or economic world, whether they live in Chicago or elsewhere.

Turning point

The impetus for the current wave of reform stems from the Chicago teachers' strike of 1987 when the contract between the Chicago Board of Education and the teachers union expired. A month-long strike ensued—the longest in the history of the city's schools.

The strike mobilized parents, community action agencies, and eventually the business community. The public reaction was strong and overwhelmingly against the teachers. Long simmering demands for school reform erupted from all corners of the city—and from the State Capitol in Springfield. The strike ended; the furor did not. The late Mayor Harold Washington convened an "education summit" to issue recommendations for school improvement. The Illinois General Assembly's Citizens Council on School Problems scheduled hearings in Chicago before developing its legislative proposal.

Political action

Last spring, the General Assembly considered several bills to improve Chicago schools. Hours of meetings and negotiating sessions followed among the mayor's office, the teachers union, school board representatives, business and community groups, and legislators. With the June 30 adjournment deadline drawing near, negotiations intensified. Finally on July 3, three days *after* the final hour, legislators approved a reform bill following a partisan roll-call vote.

Accusations by Republican legislators of a Democratic "sell-out" to the unions and to members of the "Black Caucus" in the legislature prompted the division along party lines.

Reaction

While the reform measures first proposed were far-reaching, many thought that principals needed a freer rein to hire the best qualified teachers. This group strongly opposed the provision limiting principal discretion to a list of veteran teachers. Others said the legislation moved too slowly on implementing a choice plan. Of greatest concern was the possible political influence of the mayor over the reform.

Governor James Thompson addressed these concerns in September by making an amendatory veto of the legislation. Under the state constitution, the governor can recommend changes in legislation which the General Assembly either can accept (by a simple majority) or override (by a three-fifths vote).

The veto revised the selection process for the members of the Oversight

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Dr. Etheredge, an educational consultant, serves as a state senator in the Illinois legislature. His experience includes that of teacher and department chairman, City Colleges of Chicago; dean and vice president of Rock Valley College; and president of McHenry County College and Waubonsee Community College.

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Chicago Reform: as first proposed

- **Local School Councils**. A Local School Council, established at each city school, consists of 11 members: six parents, two community residents, two teachers, (all of whom are elected)—and the school principal. The Council hires the principal and evaluates his or her performance at the end of each three-year contract period. The Council also decides how to allocate the school's annual lump-sum appropriation. After developing the improvement plan, the Council then monitors and reports on the school's progress.
- **Subdistrict Councils**. The city is divided into 20 elementary and three secondary school subdistricts, each with its own council composed of one parent or community member from each local school council. A subdistrict council hires a subdistrict superintendent, monitors the progress of each school within its jurisdiction, and places inadequate schools in remediation or on probation. The councils are empowered to mediate disputes between a principal and support staff, to replace a local school council, to fire a principal or a school's entire staff, and to close a school.
- **Principals**. The principal works under the conditions of a renewal contract: the practice of tenure is abolished. Principals have authority to select, supervise, and evaluate school staff. However, principals must fill instructional vacancies with teachers on a list of "supernumerary" personnel (tenured teachers who lost their jobs because of declining enrollments) and could not hire an entry-level teacher or one from another district.
- **Teachers**. The local school council system gives teachers a louder voice in the development of a school improvement plan. Principals are responsible for evaluating teacher performance. Teachers will have a 45-day period (reduced from the previous 180 days) to improve any unsatisfactory categories.
- **Board of Education**. The present Board is abolished 30 days after the legislation takes effect (July 1, 1989). An Interim Board of seven members appointed by the mayor will exercise the traditional board powers until May 15, 1990, with the caveat that no action be taken to impede the School Reform Act. The Chicago City Council can veto the mayor's appointments to the Interim Board. In May 1990 the new Central Board will take office. The mayor will appoint its 15 members from a slate of 45 candidates (three for each position) compiled by the School Board Nominating Commission. The City Council again may veto any of the mayor's choices. A newly established School Reform Oversight Authority will supervise implementation of the reforms. The mayor selects four of the seven members (including the chairman) with the governor filling the remaining positions.
- **School Improvement Plans**. Each school community develops a three-year improvement plan designed to bring student attendance, achievement, and graduation rates up to national norms, as well as to prepare students for further education and employment. After the plan receives approval by the local school council, the principal is responsible for implementation; the Council for monitoring the results.
- **Central Administration Budget Cap**. A budget cap for the central administrative staff equal to the average spent by all other unit school districts in the state will be enforced—with an estimated total savings of $46 million.
- **Open Enrollment**. A commission will study a plan.

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Authority to require a joint appointment of the chairman by the governor and the mayor instead of by the mayor alone. Similarly, the Governor struck the mandate to hire displaced teachers, thus allowing principals to consider entry-level applicants and staff with experience in other school systems. Another change set start-up dates for an open enrollment pilot program.

Final action

The General Assembly reconvened in mid-November to consider the Governor's vetoes. On December 1 the legislature approved a 124-page Chicago school reform bill differing on several key issues from the earlier version.

- **Reform Oversight**. The Chicago School Finance Authority (instead of the Oversight Authority) will direct the reform effort. The Finance Authority was established in 1980 to manage the school system's fiscal crisis.
- **Principals**. Performance-based contracts are lengthened from three to four years.
- **Hiring Teachers**. The principal can select teachers from outside the system, but must first interview the supernumerary teachers. Unassigned teachers will be transferred to non-teaching positions within the system without loss of salary or seniority. In the recent past, about 200 teachers each year fall into this category, with the great majority being reassigned to other Chicago schools.

Net result

The elimination of the Oversight Authority removes one layer of the bureaucracy and solves the knotty political problem of whether the mayor or the governor would exercise authority over that group. The principal's full authority to hire teachers was allowed only at the considerable expense of "featherbedding" veteran staff who are not selected to fill the vacancies.

Lessons for other boards

The legislation restructures and decentralizes the Chicago school system. Many of the reforms are among the most controversial of those discussed by educators throughout the United States:

- **Parental involvement in schools**. School power is decentralized by transferring many of the Board of Education's powers to local school and subdistrict councils. Six parents—a majority of the 11 members—sit on each local school council. In effect,

parents have the final say in choosing and keeping school principals. The principal, in turn, has the strongest voice in the selection and retention of instructional staff. The principal and the local council jointly develop the improvement plan.

Parental control of the local school councils represents the most far-reaching initiative. Many parents have felt intimidated and alienated by the large size and bureaucratic structure of the city school system. The reform does more than provide greater access: the legislation sanctions parental control of neighborhood schools.

- **Principal accountability**. Designated as school community leaders, principals have greater authority over hiring teachers and managing school affairs. Principals are the key to developing and implementing school improvements. At the same time, accountability is ensured by the renewable four-year contracts.
- **School improvement plans**. Schools must chart improvement plans complete with achievement-level goals and implementation strategies. Of crucial importance is the *plan's emphasis on goal setting and achievement rather than on educational process*. Schools in recent decades have favored process over outcomes and now the nation is reaping that harvest.
- **Educational choice**. The legislation sets in motion a plan to develop an open enrollment system that will allow parents to choose the school best suited to the educational needs of their children. In effect, parents will be able to "vote with their feet" by moving children out of a school that is not meeting their needs. Fostering a competitive spirit among school communities may be the most effective way to motivate educators to deliver a higher quality product.

Too much? Too soon?

Some think the reform reaches too far by giving parents the controlling majority on the school councils. Most parents, they argue, are unqualified and unwilling to serve as productive and effective participants. Given too much authority, parents will abuse and mismanage their decisionmaking power, some aver.

Many board members would agree that the task assigned to local school and subdistrict councils is formidable. It frequently takes a new board member a year, sometimes longer, to become comfortable with the job even with the extensive support of veteran board members, administrative staff, and state and national school boards associations. The councils are new organizations, without experienced members, without traditions, without policies to guide them in building relationships with the principal or the Central Board. These councils will be pioneers in formulating new working relationships among parents, schools, and central administrators.

Crystal ball of concerns

Need for training. In such a situation there are bound to be failures, both individual and collective. Some of the councils possibly will become dominated by the two teacher members. Others perhaps will be unduly influenced by the community representatives, especially if these members are activists with a successful community track record. As quickly as possible the new council members need training in boardsmanship. Similarly, they need access to the available information resources. One solution is to earmark for on-the-job training of council members some of the $46 million in savings from the reduced central administrative staff budget. The investment could make the difference between short-term failure and long-term improvement in the educational system.

More bureaucracy. During its five-year charter, the Finance Authority will serve as another level in the system's reporting hierarchy. The transition between the current Board of Education and the new Central Board, too, will cause bureaucratic confusion. Also, the new accountability provisions will produce requests for additional staff at the school level and perhaps in the central office to assist in the preparation of the required reports.

The buck stops at the principal's door. A school's future enrollment will depend on how well the principal develops and implements the educational goals. Because the stakes are so great, the temptation for abuse exists, such as falsifying data to show that goals have been met and shifting children from one reporting category to another. However, thorough audits and tough penalties can discourage this behavior. By giving principals greater power and responsibility, administrators of action and purpose will be attracted to these jobs, just as many persons with these qualities now are attracted to business as a place where they can make a difference. Inadequately trained or unmotivated principals will not survive long, thus opening their positions to abler personnel.

A middle road

Several Chicago newspapers have published articles based on their investigations of the city school system. The Chicago Tribune developed a reform proposal calling for a voucher system (that would apply to public and private schools) as the only way to prompt change in the public school system. The General Assembly never considered seriously this measure because of strong opposition from various interest groups (especially the teachers union). However, if the Reform Act fails to improve Chicago schools, the greater the likelihood that a more radical measure such as a voucher system will gain support.

The great majority of Illinois' 1,000 school districts provides an adequate education as measured by standardized test scores and the performance of graduates in higher education and the workplace. Nevertheless, the state has a responsibility to ensure that *all* pupils master a minimal level of education and skills. The breadth and depth of the Chicago reform mirror the severity of the city's problem—a situation that has been allowed to deteriorate for years.

National impact

All public educators have a stake in what happens in Chicago schools. The continued authority of school boards to allow educational failure to go unchecked is being challenged in other states such as Massachusetts (by giving Boston University broad authority over Chelsea Public Schools) and New Jersey (where the state has taken over the Newark schools). The success or failure of these initiatives eventually will affect all public schools. Reforming poor schools, improving satisfactory schools, and pushing excellent schools to do even better is the work of all local school boards. Unfortunately, the job often is neglected because the decisions will mean changes in school operation, personnel, and priorities. School improvement requires action, not just talk. Local school boards now must examine the tough issues and begin the process of change or others will consider doing it for them. ■

1988 Updating Index

The *Annual Index* listing the year's *Updating* articles by title, author, and subject is included in this month's administrator's policy packet. Additional copies are available from the Editor of this publication in care of Education and Management Services, NSBA, 1680 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314 or phone 703/838-6735.

Does change equal reform?

by Jay Rogers

The potential changes in store for Chicago's public schools offer hope mainly to those who doubt the system could be any worse. Although former Education Secretary William Bennett called Chicago schools the worst in the nation, the lack of student achievement pales in significance to the pervasive attitudes of apathy and despair throughout the different school constituencies. Is it *possible* to "reform" something so bad?

The proposed reform preserves a huge and cumbersome central administration (described as the local "Pershing Palace" because of the luxuries of the quarters) and maintains the seniority status of union teachers (many of whom allegedly have inadequate skills). In addition, the reform fails to address the central problem with Chicago schools: the inability of building-level administrators to implement site-based management. The suggested solutions use the existing pool of principals—another group with a history of strong political power and questionable performance.

When the power of the groups responsible for the problems remains unshaken, reforms such as increased local control and the possibility of open enrollment are far too little to effect meaningful change for Chicago's school children.

A few local school councils—those fortunate enough to have excellent human capital resources and wise enough to let them do their work—probably could improve these schools. But, Chicago is a notoriously political city. Even at the local school level, people of good intentions still will have to struggle to keep concern directed—and resources expended—in the direction of student welfare. And what would be the value of letting parents choose their child's school when all of the available choices are unsatisfactory?

Enactment of even these modest "reforms" for a long while hung in legislative limbo as the governor and the state legislators from Chicago vied for power, all the while being buffeted by skilled pressure groups. This and future reforms enacted may well be decided on the basis of what powerful people want for themselves rather than what will help the children. The enormous budget of the Chicago Public Schools seems to inspire abuse not responsibility.

Reform—real reform—probably would require disbanding the old power bases and closing the "Pershing Palace." Chicago needs multiple, fully autonomous school districts, each with the power to negotiate separate labor and purchasing contracts. The city needs school boards that are not the mayor's appointees. For reform to work, the people involved first must understand the difference between competence and incompetence and then take action to replace poor quality staff with motivated and skilled ones who are prepared to take on the educational challenges. ■

Dr. Rogers is an associate professor of counseling and educational psychology at Loyola University of Chicago. She serves on the Matteson (IL) District 162 Board of Education.

A mixed bag of reform

by John A. Stewart

In his article, Forest Etheredge describes the Chicago reforms in two ways. First, he makes the assumption that only the schools are responsible for the poor academic and social performance of their students. This line of thought ignores the strong pressures exerted on children by their home and culture. I contend that unless these more potent factors in society are addressed, no reform—be it fashioned like Chicago's or along other lines—will produce substantive or long-term improvement of the schools and their pupils.

Second, Etheredge identifies both the positive and negative components of the reform legislation. Its productive aspects include the elimination of principal tenure; the development of school improvement plans; and the empowerment of local advisory groups representing the stakeholders in schools—parents and community members.

The detrimental parts include the far too explicit description of the reform measures. Such an approach creates the potential for sparking adversarial situations at the local level; more general language allows each local group to develop a working consensus on the specifics. Also, a choice system (open enrollment) will not work. This reform conflicts with the founding principle of the public school system: providing an equal education for every child.

The reform's emphasis would be better placed on guaranteeing that all parents—regardless of where they live—have a local school that provides an equal and quality education, one that equips pupils with the knowledge and skills necessary for success in life.

Certain of the reforms may well be educationally counter-productive:

- **There is no evidence presented in the article that the School Finance Authority would be any more responsive than the current Board of Education.**
- **The proposed local school council, dominated by parents and community members, is not the proper group to develop a school's educational improvement plan. This charge is better left to educators who then would involve more of the school community than the principal and two teachers required in the legislation.**

In short, the Chicago reforms are an attempt by an outside political agency to impose a surefire fix-it-all proposal for a school system that requires much more. The measures fail to take into account the complexities of the urban environment and the forces that prompted the current state of decay. The problems of urban America are not limited to its schools.

Finally, Etheredge does emphasize that most of Illinois' 1,000 school districts are delivering a quality education. This, I think, translates into the vast majority of America's school boards. ■

Dr. Stewart has served as the elected superintendent of Polk County Schools (FL) since 1983. The nation's 46th largest district, Polk County schools enroll 62,000 (K-12) pupils. Dr. Stewart is president-elect of the Florida Association of District School Superintendents, a member of the Florida Education Practices Commission, and an advisor to the National Joint Council on Economics Education.